



Department of Infrastructure,
Local Government and Planning

Our ref: DGBN15/808

15 SEP 2015

Mr Brian Pidgeon
Chief Executive Officer
Toowoomba Regional Council
PO Box 3021
Village Fair Post Office
TOOWOOMBA QLD 4350

Dear Mr Pidgeon *Brian*

I am writing to you in relation to representations received by the Honourable Jackie Trad MP, Deputy Premier, Minister for Transport, Minister for Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning and Minister for Trade, from the Darling Downs Shire Steering Committee (DDS Steering Committee) and a number of residents supporting the establishment of a new Darling Downs Shire consisting of the former Clifton, Millmerran and Pittsworth Shires, and the rural parts of the former Cambooya and Jondaryan Shires.

In relation to the DDS Steering Committee's proposal, the Government's policy position for significant changes to local government boundaries requires each of the following criteria to be met before a referral to the Local Government Change Commission is considered:

- A request from the local communities affected by the proposed change.
- Resolution(s) supporting the proposed change from the affected local government(s), in this case, Toowoomba Regional Council.
- Assessments demonstrating the future financial sustainability of both the Toowoomba Regional Council and the proposed new local government area.

I understand the Toowoomba Regional Council has not provided any indication to date as to whether it formally supports the DDS Steering Committee's proposal or not.

However, as the DDS Steering Committee has demonstrated a level of local community support for its proposal, officers of the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning have met with proponents in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind their bid to break away from the Toowoomba Regional Council and create a new shire.

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The main issues of concern raised by the DDS Steering Committee are outlined below for your comment and response. I wish to emphasise that the Department does not endorse or hold a particular view about the claims made by the Steering Committee. The purpose of this letter is to provide the Council the opportunity to respond to the issues raised by the DDS Steering Committee to enable the Department to comprehensively brief the Deputy Premier on the proposal.

Growth and development

The proponents indicate the Council has actively promoted industry towards Toowoomba's industrial areas and away from rural centres.

Examples given include:

- the Council cancelling a tender process for Council-owned industrial land in Clifton without explanation
- costs and red-tape associated with development permits for rural businesses are not conducive to promoting business development
- purportedly, the Council has not approved any new businesses in rural areas since amalgamation in 2008.

In addition, proponents are concerned the rural-based Council work depots and service centres are gradually being whittled away and local staff are being replaced by Toowoomba-based contractors.

Service delivery

The proponents indicate there are a number of issues associated with the current levels of service delivery, and these issues could be better managed with the creation of a new local government focussed on addressing rural issues.

Examples given include:

- there is a shortfall between the rates received from the rural areas compared to the amount of expenditure outlaid in those areas, suggesting they are effectively subsidising projects and services in northern parts of the Toowoomba Regional Council
- there is a lack of understanding, expenditure and quality of works in relation to rural roads and rural road maintenance. For example, little or no bitumen has been laid in the former Millmerran Shire since the amalgamation in 2008, and the DDS Steering Committee indicates where works have been undertaken, it has not been in the most appropriate areas
- there is no evidence that Toowoomba Regional Council has implemented an adequate roads maintenance program
- the Council service centres in rural towns have become no more than 'referral centres' causing delays and frustration for local communities
- the rationalisation of Council depots in rural areas has resulted in:
 - lost time with workers taking more time to access and transport Council equipment
 - a loss of local workers and knowledge of rural needs.

Elected representation

Toowoomba Regional Council is undivided for electoral purposes and has a total of 11 councillors, including the Mayor.

Currently, there are only two councillors who live in the rural areas of the region, and the proponents are concerned rural representation will decrease with the majority of the voting population located in and near the urban centre of Toowoomba.

Although the proponents indicated there are some grass-roots bodies established to assist in addressing rural issues, they are concerned this process is not effective enough to ensure the Council decisions are made with a focus on the interests of rural residents in the region.

The proponents indicate the Toowoomba Regional Council recently rejected a proposal to implement divisions across the region and, consequently, they argue their case for a new Shire would guarantee representation for the rural residents.

Communities of interest

The DDS Steering Committee considers there are two distinct communities of interest and that the Council does not have an interest in the rural areas of the region.

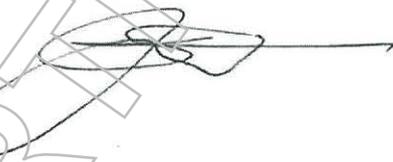
Rural residents are concerned with mining and coal seam gas development in the region at the expense of protecting underground water reserves. However, the proponents consider these industries would be seen as an interest and benefit to business expansion in Toowoomba.

In addition, the Council has a focus on larger scale projects including the CBD renewal, traffic issues, water supply, waste treatment, proposed range crossing, inland rail, and the airport. As such, there are concerns that without elected representation there will be minimal focus on rural issues, such as employment, service provision, flood plain management, pest management and rural road maintenance.

Thank you for your consideration of these matters and I look forward to your response in due course.

If you require further information, I encourage you to contact Mr Max Barrie, Director Program Implementation and Review, Local Government and Regional Services in the Department, on 3452 6704 or by email at max.barrie@dilgp.qld.gov.au.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Johnston
Acting Director-General